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Classroom Management Students Observing Student Teachers: A Win-Win Combination

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Abstract

Classroom management has long been a grave concern for pre-service teachers. This study explores a unique teaching assignment designed to enhance the learning opportunities of pre-service education students in two distinct ways. By one, bridging the reality-based world of the elementary classroom with the world of the pre-service teacher educator and two, by providing a glimpse into the mystique of the student teaching semester, pre-service educators confirmed that this observational assignment helped to prepare them to be future teachers on multiple levels. Twenty-seven pre-service elementary education students enrolled in a senior level, classroom management course participated in a field-based observational assignment and were later surveyed. Qualitative research methods were utilized and findings indicate that students viewed this assignment as worthwhile in linking theory to practice and helping to prepare for their critical student teaching semester. Possible recommendations for future assignments are suggested.

Introduction

Classroom management continues to be the most common concern cited by student teachers (Clement, 1999; Clement, 2000) as well as beginning and experienced teachers (Pigge & Marso, 1997; Veenman, 1984; Wesley & Vocke, 1992; White, 1995). Good & Brophy (1986) found that classroom studies of effective teaching have emphasized the behavioral aspects of teaching and highlighted classroom management as one of the most critical features of good teaching. However, learning to be an effective classroom manager can be both challenging and difficult, and student teachers often report feeling underprepared as they enter their culminating semester of student teaching (Matus, 1999; Pilarski, 1994; Tulley, 1995; White, 1995).

Even earlier within the teacher education process, Armstrong (1976) believes classroom management is a pressing concern among undergraduate education students as they approach their all important student teaching experience. Some students fear that this area is given the least amount of attention during their teacher training programs (Welker, 1976) even though it is a major concern. Although a number of teacher preparation programs address issues of classroom management and discipline within their programs of study, not all have explicit courses set out to identify strategies and practices

to assist pre-service teachers in this specific area. Clement (2002) believes “student teachers attribute their underpreparation to not having required college coursework in this area, or having impractical, theoretical coursework. As teacher educators strive to increase the knowledge base of teaching and teacher education, attention has to be directed to the creation of effective courses in classroom management” (p. 48).

Idea Construction and Rationale

McCormack (2001) states pre-service and in-service teachers often cite classroom management and discipline as among the most difficult and disturbing aspects of teaching. Recent research centering on the role of teaching and classroom management in Australia and the United States yields similar findings. Classroom management is beginning to be thought of in a much different way than in the past (Gordon, Arthur, & Butterfield, 1996; Lewis, 1994; Martin, Yin, & Baldwin, 1997; White, 1995). McCormack (2001) states, “the focus has shifted from a primary concern for discipline as a response to misbehavior to a concern for a more holistic approach using effective classroom organization and management. This shift has required a rethink of teacher education programs to offer pre-service teachers a relevant integration of classroom management issues, concepts, and strategies during teacher education and throughout induction and in-service years” (p. 12).

In a quest to improve professional preparation within teacher education programs it is important to explore what student extract from their pre-service courses and field experiences (McCormack, 2001). Using an assignment given to elementary education undergraduate students in a classroom management course, this study extracts their thoughts, ideas, and perceptions of classroom management by having them observe first-hand a lesson taught by a student teacher in their same program of study.

The idea for this assignment was developed during the fall semester of 2002. At that time I was an assistant professor in the Elementary Education Department at a state university outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My primary teaching responsibilities consisted of supervising student teachers and teaching a senior level methods course in classroom management. Similar to much of the research centering on classroom management and pre-service teachers, through informal conversations held with students I realized many of them did, in fact, worry about issues related to management and discipline.

Additionally, I learned many classroom management students worried about the demands of the student teaching semester and the challenges that it brings. In this specific elementary education program students take a prescribed number of required courses in particular order. The senior-level classroom management course is a core requirement, which must be completed either the semester prior to student teaching or during the student teaching semester. During the fall of 2002, most of my management students were scheduled to student teach the following semester, in spring 2003.

I learned much anxiety exists as pre-service teachers anticipate their student teaching assignment. Coined as “the most challenging, rewarding, and critical stage” (Goethals & Howard, 2000) of teacher education, there is a general consensus that the student teaching experience is the key one for teacher preparation programs (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). Many students see it as an opportunity to apply the knowledge, skill, and theory learned on campus to the “real” classroom (Clement, 2002), and my students were no exception. In fact, many students explained that they view the elementary education program as having two distinct phases. The first is the theoretical phase of coursework, and the second is the reality phase of student teaching.

By requiring my classroom management students to head into the field to observe my student teachers I sought to bridge together the two separate worlds of the elementary education program and demystify the student teaching experience, along with the anxiety it seems to create. Instead of using instructional videos, simulating management situations in class at the university, or studying written scenarios from textbooks, all of which I have done at other points within the semester, this field-based assignment was designed to provide two significant learning opportunities. First, it was designed to provide exposure to a real classroom with real students and a real student teacher as a learning tool for my seniors. I opted for “the real environment”; not a simulated or unrealistic interpretation of what takes place in an elementary classroom, in an effort to bring a sense of reality into our classroom discussions and assignments. The second learning opportunity gave my management students a real-life glimpse into what the world of student teaching looks like and sounds like. Since this group of students would be experiencing their student teaching semester in less than seven short weeks, it was meant to be a preview of coming attractions. Since the anxiety and excitement leading up to the monumental semester of student teaching can be both exhilarating and frightening, this experience sought to provide a “glimpse of reality.” It was my hope that if the management students could observe student teachers using appropriate management techniques and strong organizational strategies to successfully teach students, their confidence in their own ability would rise. I was hoping that these budding student teachers would enter their student teaching experience with more of a “can do” attitude, as opposed to an “oh no” attitude.

In addition to the learning opportunities I was envisioning for my students, I was hopeful that as the students completed this assignment I would formulate a stronger understanding of what management skills and organizational strategies they had learned throughout the semester. In this sense I could assess what knowledge they had learned in regards to managing classroom behaviors during a lesson.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 27 elementary education students at a state university outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who were enrolled in a classroom management course during the fall of 2002. In addition to this classroom management course, all the students were taking other courses and were considered full time status.

The classroom management course is a three-credit course required by the Elementary Education Department and must be taken either the semester proceeding, or during, the student teaching semester. Throughout the course students met twice weekly and were exposed to multiple classroom management theorists, plus they explored strategies related to organizing the classroom, motivating students, handling undesirable behaviors, working with parents, keeping students on task, etc. In this fashion, classroom management was presented not only as a series of skills and techniques, but also as models of educational philosophy. Charles' (1999) text, *Building Classroom Discipline* and Cangelosi's (2000) text, *Classroom Management Strategies: Gaining and Maintaining Students' Cooperation* were used to broaden the students' knowledge base of various models of managing student behavior.

Along with the classroom management students, central to this study, two student teachers participated in this study. These student teachers were three-quarters of the way through their student teaching semester in a third grade placement in an elementary school just 20 minutes southeast of the university. This particular elementary school is one of four in an elite school district in Delaware County, and frequently opens it's doors to take university students to provide a student teaching experience.

Procedure

In an effort to integrate theory with practice the 27 classroom management students were provided with an assignment which required them to observe a student teacher teaching a lesson. I had conferred with the two chosen student teachers and they, and their cooperating teachers, agreed to participate in this learning activity. It must be noted that these particular student teachers were doing an exceptional job throughout their student teaching placement. To help make this a successful experience for all, I went over the assignment with them and asked them to highlight a variety of different management strategies and procedures that we had learned in class that semester.

On a cold November morning I met my management students at a local elementary school. We broke into two groups of approximately thirteen, and proceeded to the third grade wing. Each of the two student teachers was observed teaching a math lesson that was approximately seventy-five minutes in length. The management students were instructed to stay for the entire lesson and to write up a case study report based on the observation.

To assist the management students with their new role of "observer" they were provided with a "guiding concepts" sheet. This sheet was meant to help them focus on the classroom management strategies that might have been used during the math lesson. The management ideas that were listed on the guiding concept sheet are listed in Table 1 and were intended to help focus the students during the lesson. It was not viewed as an exhausted listed and students were expected to add to it.

Table 1
Guiding Concept Sheet

As you observe a student teacher teaching a lesson today focus on what classroom management strategies are utilized. Jot down notes during the observation and type them up in paragraph form to be handed in as Case Study #4. Do not just list what you see, but tell me what strategies you observed and when during the lesson you saw them used.

Here are just some management ideas that have been mentioned in class to guide your observation skills. This is not an exhausted list so be prepared to add to it.

How are the direction given?

Cueing, modeling

Motivating students (intrinsically, extrinsically)

Questioning skills

Distributing materials

Body language

Transitions between activities

Room set up

Movement around room

Proximity control

Time limits

Eye contact

Flow, momentum, withitness (Kounin)

Rewards/consequences

Praise

Disruptive and non-disruptive off-task behaviors

During the observation students were instructed to jot down notes and type them into paragraph form to be handed in during our next class. Students were also instructed to explain when during the lesson they witnessed the management technique being utilized since I could not be in two classrooms simultaneously. Also, they were to make the connection if any strategies/techniques related to particular theorists we studied in class we used, and explain if they agreed or disagreed with the strategies utilized.

Analysis

The students anonymously answered two research questions in relation to this unique assignment. These questions were: A) How do you think this experience has helped you in regards to what we have learned in class this semester? and B) How do you

think this experience has helped you in regards to your upcoming student teaching semester?

These collected open-ended answers were subjected to multiple readings and interpretations by this researcher. After they were collected they were continually reviewed, organized, and categorized. This was accomplished so the data could be recorded efficiently and managed in ways that allowed for easy retrieval.

The initial step in qualitative analysis is reading the documents that are to be analyzed. (Dey, 1993). I found that by reading and reread the survey responses, in an attempt to become familiar with the data, it helped me to uncover themes and patterns within the open-ended responses. During this reading time I wrote notes I call analytic memos in order to develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships. Referred to as “an essential technique for qualitative analysis” these memos not only assisted in my reflection of the data collection, but captured my analytical thinking about the data by facilitating such thinking and stimulating analytical insights (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 78). Overall, data were collected, analyzed and coded according to salient themes that arose through the collected information.

I recognize that my interpretations of the use of classroom management strategies and the worth of this assignment are not completely objective, but are bound my perspectives as a researcher, the research questions, as well as my ability to interpret the words of the participants.

Findings

A great number of student responses are provided within this section to let their voices be heard. Only using a minimal amount of student excerpts would have been easier, and perhaps would have yielded a tighter, more concise findings section. Yet, since one of my primary purposes for sharing this teaching strategy is to encourage other professors to use this field-based assignment, I feel including a multitude of direct statements from the students would prove to be most powerful.

Linking this assignment to classroom management knowledge

When asked the question, “How do you think this experience helped you in regards to what we have learned in class this semester?” many responses were noted. The top four themes that emerged from the data are provided. These themes center on using this assignment to: 1) reinforce learning, 2) making a linkage to the real world, 3) acknowledge specific strategies in use, and 4) to use the act of observation as a positive learning tool.

Multiple students used the word **reinforced** when explaining the benefits of this particular assignment.

- ⌚ Many strategies were shown that reinforced what I've learned.
- ⌚ I thought it reinforced what we have been learning all semester.
- ⌚ I really thought this experience was also a good way to reinforce management strategies that were learned because now I have real examples to put with the words in the book.

Students seemed to view this learning experience as a way to strengthen prior learning. Likewise, many students talked about the importance of linking this assignment to the **real world**.

- ⌚ I think this experience helped me to see how workable the management strategies we learned in class were in a real classroom. There were quite a few strategies I liked on paper, but it's a different game when it comes time to putting them into play in the classroom.
- ⌚ This assignment "helped me realize I learned 'real' information this semester. This is the stuff I need to know to help get information across to my future students. Although strong management can be deceiving in a well run classroom, it is there, kind of hidden beneath the surface; and with it all other learning can take place.
- ⌚ This experience helped me to observe the theories regarding classroom management in action. It made these ideas real to me and, more importantly, made me **VALUE** what I've learned in this class more since I was able to see its purpose.

A definite linkage was made between what material was discussed in class at the university and what skills are needed in the actual classroom.

Additionally, students talked about **specific strategies** that were learned and discussed in class and then witnessed in the classroom through this experience.

- ⌚ I saw strategies used that were spoken of in class: group dynamics (Redl & Wattenberg), the importance of a strong classroom set up, the use of learning centers, and positive appraisal. These things were all witnessed.
- ⌚ It really helped put the theories and strategies in motion. We were able to observe actual teachers demonstrating different strategies we learned about in class. We also saw how classroom strategies are a natural part of teaching. I witnessed a lot of proximity control, which was done without disrupting the lesson.
- ⌚ This observation allowed me to see how the classroom was arranged and how eye contact and body language is critical. Basically, it showed that what we learned in management can really be used in teaching. Usable information – a great concept!

Another uncovered theme focused on the learning/teaching technique of this assignment. Students commented on how **observing** something helps them develop a greater understanding of the concept or technique.

- ⌚ It's such a different world from sitting in a lecture on ways to motivate or manage students – it really aided my understanding to see management techniques in practice, especially from someone not too far ahead of me in the program.
- ⌚ For me, seeing something in action helps me understand it better than only reading it or watching a video.
- ⌚ It was great seeing the management techniques put into use.

More comments centered on observing “theory in practice” were recorded as students reflected on the value of this assignment. Overall, from the anonymous feedback provided, students did believe this assignment was meaningful and worthwhile to their learning and understanding of management skills and strategies. The collected data reflects that students combined information learned throughout the semester with this real life assignment.

Linking this assignment with student teaching

When asked the question, “How do you think this experience helped you in regards to your upcoming student teaching semester?” a plethora of similar answers were provided. The overlying theme extracted from the data explained how this assignment was used as a **calming mechanism** (i.e. made them feel better, calmed their nerves, alleviate fear, broke some tension, etc.). Additionally, a few students reported that this assignment relaxed, and even **excited** them for the “mystique” that is student teaching. Since it was exceedingly difficult to separate the data into themes and categories the students’ responses are listed below.

Overall, students viewed this assignment as a stress reducer. In regard to their upcoming student teaching experience, this observational assignment helped **alleviate fears and concerns** of many of the students.

- ⌚ It makes me feel better. It didn't look as bad as I thought it would be. Management does play a really important role in teaching.
- ⌚ It calmed my nerves, it doesn't seem so scary anymore. I have always been so scared to student teach up until this last semester, I think I'm ready.
- ⌚ It eased my nerves and helped me to see “I can do this soon too.”
- ⌚ It broke some of the tension I am feeling towards student teaching. It was nice to see a student teacher in action – and being confident and able.
- ⌚ I felt that seeing the student teacher at ease and comfortable made me less apprehensive about student teaching.
- ⌚ I think this experience was a help to me as a future student teacher because it helped take some of the nervousness that I was feeling away. I was able to see a snapshot of a student teachers day and what was expected of him. This helped because that was a major question I had about student teaching. I really liked this experience.

- ⌚ It opened my eyes a little more and alleviated some concerns that I had. The chance to see a student teacher in action is something many people do not get a chance to see, and I was fortunate enough from this opportunity. It really made me anxious for next semester and eased my nervousness and fears as well. I know what to expect and feel more prepared. I think the trip to the school was one of the most helpful experiences I've had so far.
- ⌚ It calmed a lot of my fears – I'm nervous, but seeing someone towards the end of their student teaching so comfortable in the classroom, even with a bunch of college students sitting their analyzing his every move, made me realize that I can do it. I'll be all right.
- ⌚ This experience has helped me see that student teaching is not going to be that bad. It has relieved some of the stress. I know I am going to worry about it until I actually get into the classroom, but this has made me realize I don't have to worry so much.

Some students saw this experience as an **exciting motivator** for positive things to come. It also helped “shed some light” on the “mystique.”

- ⌚ After going to the school, I am even more pumped for student teaching. It really put everything in perspective and made graduation seem more like a reality. You spend 3 _ years preparing for “student teaching”. It was great to witness the “mystique” that is student teaching.
- ⌚ I am more relaxed (still a bit worried about the work load), but not as actually worried about being in the classroom. It is nice to see student teachers so relaxed and comfortable with their coops and students.
- ⌚ It was good to see how the flow of a lesson was influenced by management techniques. Talking with him (the student teacher) afterwards really made me feel more enthused about student teaching next semester.
- ⌚ I especially enjoyed this field trip. I am not really nervous about the teaching part, but rather working with another teacher and the amount of work he/she will expect from me. This observation allowed me to see how most teachers enjoy their student teachers and try to help them as much as possible.
- ⌚ I thought this experience helped me get a feel of what student teaching is all about. I was able to recognize and observe different strategies implemented throughout the lesson. Seeing strategies in action was very helpful to my learning process.
- ⌚ This experience was the most helpful preparation for student teaching that I have received in my 3 _ years of college. It alleviated most of my anxiety about the unknown.
- ⌚ This experience 1) calmed my nerves, 2) gave me a peek into what I will be doing for the next few months, 3) gave me confidence that I can do this!

- ⌚ I feel so much better about going into student teaching. No one tells us anything about what's going to happen and what to expect. I was expecting A LOT worse.

In sum, students viewed this assignment as helpful in uncovering some of the “unknown” of the student teaching semester. These pre-service student teachers were provided a small glimpse of what student teaching can bring, and through their responses it seemed to evoke a level of excitement, while simultaneously reducing anxiety.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The analyses demonstrated that, as a result in participation in a field-based observational assignment, pre-service teachers made multiple connections between theory and skills discussed in class and what they observed happening in the “real world classroom.” As a result of this experience many students reported feeling more prepared and excited to begin their own student teaching experience.

It is important for teacher educators to try to create opportunities for this linkage and provide meaningful experiences in the real school setting, as well as ample time to reflect and discuss these experiences. Early in their training, and throughout their coursework, students should be provided with opportunities to link theory with practice by maintaining a connection with the reality of the classroom. Although setting these experiences up is the responsibility of the professor and the education department, it is critical for student learning and comprehension. Perhaps, if more of these reality-based learning experiences were assigned, even in non-field-based classes, the “mystique” of student teaching would be minimized and students would have a firm understanding of the rigors of day to day teaching.

Overall, I believe this observational assignment was beneficial to all involved. The classroom management students were provided with a real assignment based in reality that unlocked some of the mystique of student teaching. The two student teachers were afforded the opportunity to be observed teaching a lesson from “another set of eyes”. Although sometimes nerve racking for your professionals, practicing this at an early stage of their career will help them later on when parents and or district administrators observe their teaching techniques. Lastly, I felt that I grew as an educator through this assignment as well. I could see what linkages my students made between the course content and the in-field observation, as well as see if this experience helped or hindered their perception of student teaching.

Although I feel this assignment was full of merit, the possibility of expanding and strengthening this learning experience in future semesters is definitely worth exploring. If this assignment were to be repeated I would insist on making minor modifications. I would plan on having a smaller number of students visit each student teacher's lesson. Thirteen extra bodies made for a crowded classroom. I would try to arrange for my student teachers to observe multiple lessons taught by multiple student teachers so they

could later compare and contrast what management strategies are more appropriate with different groups/grades levels of students. Exploring the idea of videotaping the student teacher teaching the observed lesson, so all of the management students could watch the same lesson at a later time, would certainly be worth investigating. Setting up the learning experience in this fashion would give all the students a “similar frame of reference” to spark an in-class discussion.

Lastly, as another way to improve this learning assignment in future semesters, I would insist on collecting both verbal and written feedback from the students directly involved. Personally, I find students to be brutally honest when providing feedback on what learning techniques help them most. If their feedback is combined with the many other modifications I’ve mentioned here, I feel this real life observational learning assignment can be a beneficial way to solidify the importance of strong classroom management skills while providing a snapshot of the work of student teaching.

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